

RALPH SALISBURY'S POETRY HONORS A COMPLEX HERITAGE

By Eleanor Berry

The name Ralph Salisbury sounds like that of an English earl. The Oregon poet who bears that name grew up in poverty on an Iowa farm, child of an Irish-American mother and half-Cherokee father. Now in his eighties and long retired from teaching creative writing at the University of Oregon, Salisbury continues to write poems faithful to his origins and to all the people and experiences that have helped to shape him.

In his poetry we see Salisbury as a boy running traplines to get fur pelts for rich people's coats and hunting out of season to secure much-needed food for his family. We see him as a bomber pilot in World War II—and as a pacifist in all subsequent wars. We see him as son, husband, father, and grandfather, and we come to know him as humane and generous, sensitive to the natural world and highly aware of humans' dependence on it, critical of a society that is often greedy, intolerant, and short-sighted. His poems, gathered in nearly a dozen collections, are challenging in both content and style.

The sentences in Salisbury's poems are often long and difficult to parse because they are constructed as embodiments of the complex relationships they describe. Thus a poem occasioned by a visit to the Anasazi ruins at Canyon de Chelly is a single sentence, taking 22 lines. It begins by setting the scene and establishing the historical context:

Where Americans, in
the name of civilization, and
Conquistadors, in
the name of the Virgin,
massacred Navajo braves in
the womb ...

It characterizes the speaker in his complex relation to that historical context:

An Irish-English-Cherokee survivor of nuclear war,
a brother, in prayer, in blood ...
involuntary countryman
of those invading, this time, Vietnam ...

It acknowledges the speaker's connection to a white American who carved his name on the Anasazi walls: "J. W. Conway...Santa Fe...1873,' / boast carved into wall surviving as a confession, / which could have been mine more times than one" It ends with a trenchant recognition: "the home he desecrated / one victor's grave stone."

Likewise, the images in Salisbury's poems do not so much evoke emotion as embody connections. Physical resemblances between things serve to signify relationships across time and space. Thus, in a poem titled "Wild Goose, Eaten, and Owl, Knitted to Hang on Wall" and dedicated to the poet's mother, imagery links the son's shooting a migrant wild goose for his mother to cook for the family to her knitting a hanging now on the aged poet's wall as he writes. The migrant goose is first seen as a "Gray petal, soon to fall from crimson dawn." The cooking and knitting mother's fingers are "as ceaseless as wings / seeking sufficient summer." She knits "red yarn / into the blossoms on a bough an owl's black / prey-piercing claws ... clutch." The poet tries "to make my pen knit / another migrant's flight," presumably his own, to an imagined "Gulf warm, ancestors' nesting-place there."

These poems cannot be read quickly for the stories they tell, though they do tell stories. Most need to be read carefully several times, to be read aloud, to be pondered. They are complex constructions in language bearing witness to an experience both wide and deep.